



BILLING CODE 3510-22-P

DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE

National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration

[RTID 0648-XA373]

Takes of Marine Mammals Incidental to Specified Activities; Taking Marine Mammals Incidental to Office of Naval Research Arctic Research Activities

AGENCY: National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS), National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), Commerce.

ACTION: Notice; issuance of Renewal incidental harassment authorization.

SUMMARY: In accordance with the regulations implementing the Marine Mammal Protection Act (MMPA), as amended, notification is hereby given that NMFS has issued a Renewal incidental harassment authorization (IHA) to the U.S. Navy's Office of Naval Research (ONR) to harass marine mammals incidental to Arctic Research Activities in the Beaufort and Chukchi Seas.

DATES: This Renewal IHA is valid from September 10, 2020 through September 9, 2021.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION CONTACT: Amy Fowler, Office of Protected Resources, NMFS, (301) 427-8401. Electronic copies of the original application, Renewal request, and supporting documents (including NMFS **Federal Register** notices of the original proposed and final authorizations, and the previous IHA), as well as a list of the references cited in this document, may be obtained online at:

<https://www.fisheries.noaa.gov/permit/incidental-take-authorizations-under-marine->

mammal-protection-act. In case of problems accessing these documents, please call the contact listed above.

SUPPLEMENTARY INFORMATION:

Background

The MMPA prohibits the “take” of marine mammals, with certain exceptions. Sections 101(a)(5)(A) and (D) of the MMPA (16 U.S.C. 1361 *et seq.*) direct the Secretary of Commerce (as delegated to NMFS) to allow, upon request, the incidental, but not intentional, taking of small numbers of marine mammals by U.S. citizens who engage in a specified activity (other than commercial fishing) within a specified geographical region if certain findings are made and either regulations are issued or, if the taking is limited to harassment, a notice of a proposed incidental take authorization is provided to the public for review.

Authorization for incidental takings shall be granted if NMFS finds that the taking will have a negligible impact on the species or stock(s) and will not have an unmitigable adverse impact on the availability of the species or stock(s) for taking for subsistence uses (where relevant). Further, NMFS must prescribe the permissible methods of taking and other “means of effecting the least practicable adverse impact” on the affected species or stocks and their habitat, paying particular attention to rookeries, mating grounds, and areas of similar significance, and on the availability of such species or stocks for taking for certain subsistence uses (referred to here as “mitigation measures”). Monitoring and reporting of such takings are also required. The meaning of key terms such as “take,” “harassment,” and “negligible impact” can be found in section 3 of the MMPA (16 U.S.C. 1362) and the agency’s regulations at 50 CFR 216.103.

NMFS' regulations implementing the MMPA at 50 CFR 216.107(e) indicate that IHAs may be renewed for additional periods of time not to exceed one year for each reauthorization. In the notice of proposed IHA for the initial authorization, NMFS described the circumstances under which we would consider issuing a Renewal for this activity, and requested public comment on a potential Renewal under those circumstances. Specifically, on a case-by-case basis, NMFS may issue a one-time one-year Renewal IHA following notice to the public providing an additional 15 days for public comments when (1) up to another year of identical, or nearly identical, activities as described in the **Description of the Specified Activities and Anticipated Impacts** section of this notice is planned or (2) the activities as described in the Specified Activities section of this notice would not be completed by the time the IHA expires and a Renewal would allow for completion of the activities beyond that described in the Dates and Duration section of the notice of proposed IHA for the initial authorization, provided all of the following conditions are met:

- A request for renewal is received no later than 60 days prior to the needed Renewal IHA effective date (recognizing that the Renewal IHA expiration date cannot extend beyond one year from expiration of the initial IHA).
- The request for renewal must include the following:
 - (1) An explanation that the activities to be conducted under the requested Renewal IHA are identical to the activities analyzed under the initial IHA, are a subset of the activities, or include changes so minor (*e.g.*, reduction in pile size) that the changes do not affect the previous analyses, mitigation and monitoring requirements, or take estimates (with the exception of reducing the type or amount of take).

(2) A preliminary monitoring report showing the results of the required monitoring to date and an explanation showing that the monitoring results do not indicate impacts of a scale or nature not previously analyzed or authorized.

Upon review of the request for Renewal, the status of the affected species or stocks, and any other pertinent information, NMFS determines that there are no more than minor changes in the activities, the mitigation and monitoring measures will remain the same and appropriate, and the findings in the initial IHA remain valid.

An additional public comment period of 15 days (for a total of 45 days), with direct notice by email, phone, or postal service to commenters on the initial IHA, is provided to allow for any additional comments on the proposed Renewal. A description of the Renewal process may be found on our website at:

www.fisheries.noaa.gov/national/marine-mammal-protection/incidental-harassment-authorization-renewals.

The NDAA (Pub. L. 108–136) removed the “small numbers” and “specified geographical region” limitations indicated above and amended the definition of “harassment” as it applies to a “military readiness activity.” The activity for which incidental take of marine mammals is being requested addressed here qualifies as a military readiness activity.

History of Request

On September 9, 2019, NMFS issued an IHA to ONR to take marine mammals incidental to Arctic Research Activities in the Beaufort and Chukchi Seas (84 FR 50007; September 24, 2019), effective from September 10, 2019 through September 9, 2020. On May 12, 2020, NMFS received an application for the Renewal of that initial IHA. As

described in the application for Renewal, the activities for which incidental take is requested are identical to those covered in the initial authorization. As required, the applicant also provided a preliminary monitoring report (available at <https://www.fisheries.noaa.gov/national/marine-mammal-protection/incidental-take-authorizations-military-readiness-activities>) which confirms that the applicant has implemented the required mitigation and monitoring, and which also shows that no impacts of a scale or nature not previously analyzed or authorized have occurred as a result of the activities conducted.

Description of the Specified Activities and Anticipated Impacts

ONR plans to continue its Arctic Research Activities for a third year, conducting activities identical to those analyzed in the initial IHA. In 2018, ONR began a three-year project involving several scientific objectives that support the Arctic and Global Prediction Program, as well as the Ocean Acoustics Program and the Naval Research Laboratory, for which ONR is the parent command. Specifically, the project includes the Stratified Ocean Dynamics of the Arctic (SODA), Arctic Mobile Observing System (AMOS), Ocean Acoustics field work (including the Coordinated Arctic Active Tomography Experiment (CAATEX)), and Naval Research Laboratory experiments in the Beaufort and Chukchi Seas. These experiments involve deployment of moored and ice-tethered active acoustic sources, primarily from the U.S Coast Guard Cutter (CGC) HEALY. The CGC HEALY may be required to perform icebreaking to access the northernmost portion of the Survey Area. Underwater sound from the acoustic sources and icebreaking may result in behavioral harassment of marine mammals.

Detailed Description of the Activity

A total of 12 moored acoustic navigation sources were planned to be deployed and operate through the duration of the three-year project. Of those, seven moored navigation sources were deployed in 2018 and an additional navigation source was deployed in 2019, along with a very-low frequency source (30 hertz) in the northernmost portion of the Survey Area. These acoustic sources are deployed and left behind to transmit intermittently throughout the year. The acoustic sources deployed during the 2018 and 2019 scientific cruises would continue to operate through the course of this IHA Renewal and the remaining moored and drifting sources are also planned to be deployed in 2020, such that the acoustic transmissions from September 2020 through September 2021 would be identical to those analyzed in the initial IHA.

As described in the notice of proposed IHA for the initial authorization (84 FR 37240; July 31, 2019), CGC HEALY may also be required to perform icebreaking to deploy the acoustic sources in deep water. No icebreaking was required in the 2019 research cruise, but as in the initial IHA, ONR estimates up to six hours of icebreaking per day over 16 days may occur (*e.g.*, eight days during the fall 2020 equipment deployment cruise and eight days during the fall 2021 equipment retrieval cruise).

A detailed description of the scientific research program conducted by ONR is found in the notice of proposed IHA for the initial authorization (84 FR 37240; July 31, 2019). The location, timing, and nature of the activities, including the acoustic sources planned for use, are identical to those described in the previous notice. This IHA Renewal is effective for one year past the expiration of the initial IHA (*i.e.*, from September 10, 2020 through September 9, 2021).

Description of Marine Mammals

A description of the marine mammals in the area of the activities for which authorization of take is proposed here, including information on abundance, status, distribution, and hearing, may be found in the notice of the proposed IHA (84 FR 37240; July 31, 2019). NMFS has reviewed the monitoring report from the initial IHA, recent draft Stock Assessment Reports (SARs), information on relevant Unusual Mortality Events (UMEs), and other scientific literature, and determined that neither this nor any other new information affects which species or stock have the potential to be affected or the pertinent information in the Description of the Marine Mammals in the Area of Specified Activities section contained in the supporting documents for the initial IHA.

Ice Seals UME

Since June 1, 2018, elevated strandings of ringed seals, bearded seals, and spotted seals (*Phoca largha*) have occurred in the Bering and Chukchi Seas. This event has been declared a UME. A UME is defined under the MMPA as a stranding that is unexpected; involves a significant die-off of any marine mammal population; and demands immediate response. From June 1, 2018 to February 9, 2020, there have been 278 dead seals reported, with 112 stranding in 2018, 165 in 2019, and one in 2020, which is nearly five times the average number of strandings of about 29 seals annually. All age classes of seals have been reported stranded, and a subset of seals have been sampled for genetics and harmful algal bloom exposure, with a few having histopathology collected. Results are pending, and the cause of the UME remains unknown.

There was a previous UME involving ice seals from 2011 to 2016, which was most active in 2011-2012. A minimum of 657 seals were affected. The UME investigation determined that some of the clinical signs were due to an abnormal molt,

but a definitive cause of death for the UME was never determined. The number of stranded ice seals involved in this UME, and their physical characteristics, is not at all similar to the 2011-2016 UME, as the seals in 2018-2020 have not been exhibiting hair loss or skin lesions, which were a primary finding in the 2011-2016 UME. The investigation into the cause of the most recent UME is ongoing. More detailed information is available at: <https://www.fisheries.noaa.gov/national/marine-life-distress/2018-2019-ice-seal-unusual-mortality-event-alaska>.

Potential Effects on Marine Mammals and their Habitat

A description of the potential effects of the specified activity on marine mammals and their habitat for the activities for which take is authorized here may be found in the notice of the proposed IHA for the initial authorization (84 FR 37240; July 31, 2019). NMFS has reviewed the monitoring data from the initial IHA, recent draft SARs, information on relevant UMEs, other scientific literature, and the public comments, and determined that neither this nor any other new information affects our initial analysis of impacts on marine mammals and their habitat.

Estimated Take

A detailed description of the methods and inputs used to estimate take for the specified activity are found in the notices of the proposed and final IHAs for the initial authorization (84 FR 37240, July 31, 2019; 84 FR 50007, September 24, 2019). Specifically, the source levels, days of operation, and marine mammal density and occurrence data applicable to this authorization remain unchanged from the previously issued IHA. Similarly, the stocks taken, methods of take, and types of take remain unchanged from the previously issued IHA, as do the number of authorized takes, which

are indicated below in Table 1.

Table 1 -- Authorized Take of Marine Mammals and Percent of Stocks Taken

Species	Density Estimate within Study Area (animals per square km) ^a	Level B Harassment from Deployed Sources	Level B Harassment from Icebreaking	Level A Harassment	Total Authorized Take	Percentage of Stock Taken
Beluga Whale (Beaufort Sea Stock)	0.0087	331	32	0	363	0.92
Beluga Whale (Eastern Chukchi Sea stock)	0.0087	178	18	0	196	0.94
Bearded Seal	0.0332	0	0	0	5 ^b	< 0.01
Ringed Seal	0.3760	6,773	1,072	0	7,845	2.17

^a Kaschner *et al.* (2006); Kaschner (2004)

^b Quantitative modeling yielded zero takes of bearded seals. However, in an abundance of caution, we are proposing to authorize five takes of bearded seals by Level B harassment.

Description of Mitigation, Monitoring and Reporting Measures

The mitigation, monitoring, and reporting measures included as requirements in this authorization are identical to those included in the **Federal Register** notice announcing the issuance of the initial IHA (84 FR 50007; September 24, 2019), and the discussion of the least practicable adverse impact included in that document remains accurate. The following measures are required for this Renewal:

Mitigation Measures

Ships operated by or for the Navy have personnel assigned to stand watch at all times, day and night, when moving through the water. While in transit, ships must use extreme caution and proceed at a safe speed such that the ship can take proper and effective action to avoid a collision with any marine mammal and can be stopped within a distance appropriate to the prevailing circumstances and conditions.

During navigational source deployments, visual observation must start 30 minutes prior to and continue throughout the deployment within an exclusion zone of 55 meters (m; 180 feet (ft), roughly one ship length) around the deployed mooring. Deployment must stop if a marine mammal is visually detected within the exclusion zone.

Deployment will re-commence if any one of the following conditions are met: (1) the animal is observed exiting the exclusion zone, (2) the animal is thought to have exited the exclusion zone based on its course and speed, or (3) the exclusion zone has been clear from any additional sightings for a period of 15 minutes for pinnipeds and 30 minutes for cetaceans. Visual monitoring must continue through 30 minutes following the deployment of sources.

Once deployed, the spiral wave beacon would transmit for five days. The ship will maintain position near the moored source and must monitor the surrounding area for marine mammals. Transmission must cease if a marine mammal enters a 55-m (180 ft) exclusion zone. Transmission will re-commence if any one of the following conditions are met: (1) the animal is observed exiting the exclusion zone, (2) the animal is thought to have exited the exclusion zone based on its course and speed and relative motion between the animal and the source, or (3) the exclusion zone has been clear from any additional

sightings for a period of 15 minutes for pinnipeds and 30 minutes for cetaceans. The spiral wave beacon source must only transmit during daylight hours.

Ships must avoid approaching marine mammals head on and must maneuver to maintain an exclusion zone of 1,500 ft (457 m) around observed mysticete whales, and 600 ft (183 m) around all other marine mammals, provided it is safe to do so in ice free waters.

With the exception of the spiral wave beacon, moored/drifting sources are left in place and cannot be turned off until the following year during ice free months. Once they are programmed they will operate at the specified pulse lengths and duty cycles until they are either turned off the following year or there is failure of the battery and are not able to operate. Due to the ice covered nature of the Arctic is in not possible to recover the sources or interfere with their transmit operations in the middle of the deployment.

These requirements do not apply if a vessel's safety is at risk, such as when a change of course would create an imminent and serious threat to safety, person, vessel, or aircraft, and to the extent vessels are restricted in their ability to maneuver. No further action is necessary if a marine mammal other than a whale continues to approach the vessel after there has already been one maneuver and/or speed change to avoid the animal. Avoidance measures should continue for any observed whale in order to maintain an exclusion zone of 1,500 ft (457 m).

All personnel conducting on-ice experiments, as well as all aircraft operating in the study area, are required to maintain a separation distance of 1,000 ft (305 m) from any sighted marine mammal.

Monitoring Measures

While underway, the ships (including non-Navy ships operating on behalf of the Navy) utilizing active acoustics must have at least one watch person during activities. Watch personnel undertake extensive training in accordance with the U.S. Navy Lookout Training Handbook or civilian equivalent, including on the job instruction and a formal Personal Qualification Standard program (or equivalent program for supporting contractors or civilians), to certify that they have demonstrated all necessary skills (such as detection and reporting of floating or partially submerged objects). Additionally, watch personnel have taken the Navy's Marine Species Awareness Training. Their duties may be performed in conjunction with other job responsibilities, such as navigating the ship or supervising other personnel. While on watch, personnel employ visual search techniques, including the use of binoculars, using a scanning method in accordance with the U.S. Navy Lookout Training Handbook or civilian equivalent. A primary duty of watch personnel is to detect and report all objects and disturbances sighted in the water that may be indicative of a threat to the ship and its crew, such as debris, or surface disturbance. Per safety requirements, watch personnel also report any marine mammals sighted that have the potential to be in the direct path of the ship as a standard collision avoidance procedure.

The U.S. Navy has coordinated with NMFS to develop an overarching program plan in which specific monitoring would occur. This plan is called the Integrated Comprehensive Monitoring Program (ICMP) (Navy 2011). The ICMP has been developed in direct response to Navy permitting requirements established through various environmental compliance efforts. As a framework document, the ICMP applies by regulation to those activities on ranges and operating areas for which the Navy is seeking

or has sought incidental take authorizations. The ICMP is intended to coordinate monitoring efforts across all regions and to allocate the most appropriate level and type of effort based on a set of standardized research goals, and in acknowledgement of regional scientific value and resource availability.

The ICMP is focused on Navy training and testing ranges where the majority of Navy activities occur regularly as those areas have the greatest potential for being impacted. ONR's Arctic Research Activities in comparison is a less intensive test with little human activity present in the Arctic. Human presence is limited to a minimal amount of days for source operations and source deployments, in contrast to the large majority (>95 percent) of time that the sources will be left behind and operate autonomously. Therefore, a dedicated monitoring project is not warranted. However, ONR will record all observations of marine mammals, including the marine mammal's location (latitude and longitude), behavior, and distance from project activities, including icebreaking.

Reporting Measures

The Navy is committed to documenting and reporting relevant aspects of research and testing activities to verify implementation of mitigation, comply with permits, and improve future environmental assessments. If any injury or death of a marine mammal is observed during the 2020-21 Arctic Research Activities, the Navy must immediately halt the activity and report the incident to the Office of Protected Resources, NMFS, and the Alaska Regional Stranding Coordinator, NMFS. The following information must be provided:

- Time, date, and location of the discovery;

- Species identification (if known) or description of the animal(s) involved;
- Condition of the animal(s) (including carcass condition if the animal is dead);
- Observed behaviors of the animal(s), if alive;
- If available, photographs or video footage of the animal(s); and
- General circumstances under which the animal(s) was discovered (*e.g.*, during use of towed acoustic sources, deployment of moored or drifting sources, during on-ice experiments, or by transiting vessel).

ONR must provide NMFS with a draft exercise monitoring report within 90 days of the conclusion of the proposed activity. The draft exercise monitoring report must include data regarding acoustic source use and any mammal sightings or detection must be documented. The report must include the estimated number of marine mammals taken during the activity. The report must also include information on the number of shutdowns recorded. If no comments are received from NMFS within 30 days of submission of the draft final report, the draft final report will constitute the final report. If comments are received, a final report must be submitted within 30 days after receipt of comments.

Public Comments

A notice of NMFS' proposal to issue a Renewal IHA to ONR was published in the **Federal Register** on July 10, 2020 (85 FR 41560). That notice either described, or referenced descriptions of, ONR's activity, the marine mammal species that may be affected by the activity, the anticipated effects on marine mammals and their habitat, proposed amount and manner of take, and proposed mitigation, monitoring and reporting measures. NMFS received a comment letter from the Marine Mammal Commission (Commission). The comments and our responses are summarized below.

Comment 1: The Commission noted that ONR did not stipulate the type and number of sources that would transmit or how many days of icebreaking could occur in 2020-2021 in their Renewal request. The Commission stated that without that information, NMFS cannot judge whether the activities proposed to occur in 2020-2021 are identical to or are a subset of those that were conducted in 2019–2020, whether the estimated numbers of marine mammals taken in 2019–2020 were within the authorized limits, and whether the original determinations would still be valid for the 2020-2021 IHA Renewal. Thus, the Commission recommended NMFS deny ONR’s request for IHA Renewal as submitted.

Response: NMFS appreciates the Commission’s comment regarding the information provided in ONR’s Renewal request. Although that information was not provided in the Renewal request letter itself, ONR informed NMFS that the activities planned for 2020-2021 would be identical to those analyzed in the 2019-2020 IHA and provided the information discussed in the *Detailed Description of the Activity* section of this notice. Additionally, although no marine mammals were directly observed during any source deployment in 2019, ONR provided an estimate of the number of marine mammals that may have been exposed based on the number of sources deployed and operational during 2019-2020. Eight of 21 possible acoustic sources were in use, thus ONR estimated 8/21 (38.1 percent) of total calculated takes from acoustic sources occurred during the 2019-2020 IHA, for a total of 194 belugas (from either stock) and 2,580 ringed seals. No bearded seal takes were modeled using the Navy Acoustic Effects Model (NAEMO), but out of an abundance of caution, NMFS authorized five takes of bearded seals by Level B harassment in the event bearded seals were observed during

source deployment. No bearded seals were observed in 2019, therefore no takes likely occurred.

Based on the information provided by the applicant, NMFS has determined that the estimated numbers of marine mammals taken in 2019–2020 were within the authorized limits, the original determinations are still valid for the 2020-2021 IHA Renewal, and an IHA Renewal is appropriate for ONR’s activities. NMFS is consistently working on refining protocols for processing IHA Renewals, and will ensure that future Renewal requests include all information necessary for our determinations prior to publication of the proposed Renewal.

Comment 2: The Commission recommends that NMFS refrain from issuing renewals for any authorization and instead use its abbreviated **Federal Register** notice process.

Response: In prior responses to comments about IHA Renewals (*e.g.*, 84 FR 52464; October 02, 2019), NMFS has explained how the Renewal process, as implemented, is consistent with the statutory requirements contained in section 101(a)(5)(D) of the MMPA and, therefore, we plan to continue to issue qualifying Renewals when the requirements outlined on our website are met. Thus, NMFS agrees with the Commission's recommendation that we should not issue a renewal for any authorization unless it is consistent with the procedural requirements specified in section 101(a)(5)(D)(iii) of the MMPA.

Additionally, regarding the recommendation to use abbreviated notices, we agree that they are a useful tool by which to increase efficiency in conjunction with the use of Renewals, but we disagree that their use alone would equally fulfill NMFS’ goal to

maximize efficiency and provide regulatory certainty for applicants, with no reduction in protections for marine mammals. The Renewal process, with its narrowly described qualifying actions, specific issuance criteria, and additional 15-day comment period, allows for NMFS to broadly commit to a 60-day processing time. This commitment, which would not be possible in the absence of this narrow definition and the 15-day additional comment period, provides both a meaningfully shortened processing time and regulatory certainty for planning purposes. Increasing the comment period for Renewals to 30 days would increase processing time by 25% and is unnecessary, given the legal sufficiency of the process as it stands, as described above, and no additional protections for marine mammals that would result. NMFS uses abbreviated notices when proposed actions do not qualify for Renewals, but still allow for reliance upon previous documentation and analyses. These abbreviated notice projects, which deviate from the narrow qualifications of a Renewal, require some additional time for the analyst to appropriately review the small changes from the initial IHA and further necessitate the 30-day public review required for a new IHA. NMFS has evaluated the use of both the Renewal and abbreviated notice processes, as well as the associated workload for each, and determined that using both of these processes provides maximum efficiency for the agency and applicants, regulatory certainty, and appropriate protections for marine mammals consistent with the statutory standards. Using the abbreviated notice process, however, is unnecessary and unwarranted for projects that meet the narrow qualifications for a Renewal IHA.

As previously noted, we have found that the Renewal process is consistent with the statutory requirements of the MMPA and, further, promotes NMFS' goals of

improving conservation of marine mammals and increasing efficiency in the MMPA compliance process. Therefore, we intend to continue implementing the Renewal process.

National Environmental Policy Act

In 2018, the U.S. Navy prepared an Environmental Assessment analyzing the project. Prior to issuing the IHA for the first year of this project, we reviewed the 2018 EA and the public comments received, determined that a separate NEPA analysis was not necessary, and subsequently adopted the document and issued our own Finding of No Significant Impact in support of the issuance of an IHA. In 2019, the U.S. Navy prepared a supplemental EA. Prior to issuing the IHA in 2019, we reviewed the supplemental EA and the public comments received, determined that a separate NEPA analysis was not necessary, and subsequently adopted the document and issued our own Finding of No Significant Impact in support of the issuance of an IHA.

We have reviewed ONR's application for a renewed IHA for ongoing Arctic Research Activities from September 2020 to September 2021 and the 2019 IHA monitoring report. Based on that review, we have determined that the proposed action is identical to that considered in the previous IHA. In addition, no significant new circumstances or information relevant to environmental concerns have been identified. Thus, we have determined that the preparation of a new or supplemental NEPA document is not necessary.

Determinations

The action of this Renewal IHA, ONR's Arctic Research Activities, are identical to the activities analyzed in the initial IHA. Based on the analysis detailed in the notices of the initial authorization of the likely effects of the specified activity on marine

mammals and their habitat, and taking into consideration the implementation of the monitoring and mitigation measures, NMFS found that the total marine mammal take from the activity would have a negligible impact on all affected marine mammal species and stocks.

There is an ongoing UME for ice seals, including ringed and bearded seals. Elevated strandings have occurred in the Bering and Chukchi Seas since June 2018. Though elevated numbers of seals have stranded during this UME, this event does not provide cause for concern regarding population-level impacts, as the population abundance estimates for each of the affected species number in the hundreds of thousands. ONR's Arctic Research Activities Study Area is in the Beaufort and Chukchi Seas, well north and east of the primary area where seals have stranded along the western coast of Alaska (see map of strandings at:

<https://www.fisheries.noaa.gov/national/marine-life-distress/2018-2019-ice-seal-unusual-mortality-event-alaska>). The location of ONR's Arctic Research Activities, combined with the low-level potential effects on marine mammals, suggest that the proposed activities are not expected to contribute to, or combine with, the ongoing UME in a manner that would lead to impacts on reproduction or survivorship of any individuals. Therefore, NMFS has determined that there is no new information suggesting that our analysis or findings should change from those reached for the initial IHA.

NMFS has concluded that there is no new information suggesting that our analysis or findings should change from those reached for the initial IHA. Based on the information and analysis contained here and in the referenced documents, NMFS has

determined the following: (1) the required mitigation measures will effect the least practicable impact on marine mammal species or stocks and their habitat; (2) the authorized takes will have a negligible impact on the affected marine mammal species or stocks; (3) the authorized takes represent small numbers of marine mammals relative to the affected stock abundances; (4) ONR's activities will not have an unmitigable adverse impact on taking for subsistence purposes as no relevant subsistence uses of marine mammals are implicated by this action; and (5) appropriate monitoring and reporting requirements are included.

Endangered Species Act

Section 7(a)(2) of the Endangered Species Act (ESA) of 1973 (16 U.S.C. 1531 *et seq.*) requires that each Federal agency insure that any action it authorizes, funds, or carries out is not likely to jeopardize the continued existence of any endangered or threatened species or result in the destruction or adverse modification of designated critical habitat. To ensure ESA compliance for the issuance of IHAs, NMFS consults internally, in this case with the NMFS Alaska Regional Office (AKR), whenever we propose to authorize take for endangered or threatened species.

The effects of this Federal action were adequately analyzed in NMFS' Biological Opinion for the ONR Arctic Research Activities 2018-2021, dated August 27, 2019, which concluded that the take NMFS proposes to authorize through this IHA would not jeopardize the continued existence of any endangered or threatened species or destroy or adversely modify any designated critical habitat.

Renewal

NMFS has issued a Renewal IHA to ONR for the take of marine mammals incidental to conducting Arctic Research Activities in the Beaufort and Chukchi Seas from September 10, 2020 through September 9, 2021.

Dated: August 21, 2020.

Donna S. Wieting,

Director, Office of Protected Resources,

National Marine Fisheries Service.

[FR Doc. 2020-18971 Filed: 8/27/2020 8:45 am; Publication Date: 8/28/2020]